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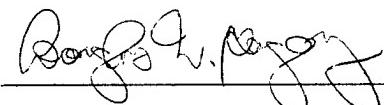
Sustained Strike Operations and American Strategy

By

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in consideration for the Red River Valley Fighter Pilots Association Award.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Abstract of

WAR WITHOUT RISK:
SUSTAINED STRIKE OPERATIONS AND AMERICAN STRATEGY

Three times since 1995, American policymakers have called upon airpower, without support from American ground forces, to conduct sustained strike operations (SSOs) in pursuit of national policy goals. These SSOs have had limited effectiveness due to constraints imposed by the complex environments in which they have been executed. American leaders should adopt several new paradigms that will make future SSOs more effective.

As attempts to violently coerce adversaries to do our will, sustained strike operations resemble wars, but they lack other important characteristics of wars. They seek to attain multiple objectives that are usually competitive rather than complementary. Their planning and execution are dominated by legitimacy concerns that reduce the effect of their strikes. And adversaries are becoming increasingly adept at countering their predictable and often pre-announced methods.

Despite their complexities and drawbacks, policymakers are likely to choose SSOs to execute policy again in the future. To make such operations more effective, policymakers should consider SSOs as wars rather than punitive strategies and be willing to take risks commensurate with the stakes involved. SSOs can also benefit greatly from small applications of ground forces to increase the lethality of air strikes. We should therefore accept cases where land forces support air forces rather than the other way around. Finally, air leaders must minimize strategic strikes in SSOs where land forces are absent or minimal, because early and concentrated strikes on enemy capabilities will be more likely to attain policy goals. •

Introduction

The United States Marine Corps thinks of itself as “America’s 911 force,” the service most prepared to intervene when a crisis occurs on short notice. There is no question that the readiness and capability of Marines is superb, but during the 1990’s policymakers have increasingly turned to another form of military action during crises—airpower. Since 1993, American leaders have called six times upon airpower, without support from American ground forces, to execute policy by striking adversaries. Three of these cases were cruise missile strikes, hitting Iraq in 1993 and 1996, and striking terrorist targets in Afghanistan and Sudan in 1998. The other three were what may be called “Sustained Strike Operations,” or SSOs, involving both manned sorties and cruise missiles over periods lasting from four days to over six weeks.

These SSO’s, Operations *Deliberate Force* against Bosnian Serbs in 1995, *Desert Fox* against Iraq in 1998, and *Allied Force* against Serbia in 1999, shared a number of common characteristics. They were joint and combined in nature, were initiated by the United States and its allies, sought limited goals, and focused their effects upon the strategic and operational levels of war. More importantly, however, they appeared to represent several important new ideas in American strategic thinking—that airpower alone can succeed where diplomacy and sanctions fail, and that SSOs can provide the benefits of warfare without its risks.

These ideas are questionable at best and dangerous at worst. Past examples of sustained strike operations have shown that airpower was frequently asked to pursue objectives that neither policymakers nor commanders expected to obtain. Previous SSO’s also involved such powerful constraints upon operations that their ability to accomplish even reasonable objectives was undermined. Should people conclude that airpower is valueless because it poorly accomplished such difficult tasks, we may avoid using airpower where it *can* make a difference in the future.

Therefore, it is essential to examine sustained strike operations to understand their strategic and operational characteristics. This essay will show that SSOs, representing less than wars but more than isolated raids, have been shaped chiefly by competing objectives and limited legitimacy, factors that sharply reduce their intensity. It will further demonstrate why, rather than conveying strength and resolve, SSOs often convey our frustration to the regimes they target and sometimes unintentionally strengthen those regimes. Finally, it will conclude by recommending that strategists treat the selection of SSOs as a decision to go to war and alter their strategic and operational paradigms in ways that can make SSOs more effective.

Are They Wars?. One common characteristic of sustained strike operations is that each was a policy of last resort, chosen when no other option seemed possible. *Deliberate Force*, for example, began after a Serb mortar attack killed 37 people at a Sarajevo marketplace in August 1995. The attack was evidence that neither years of monitoring by European peace keepers nor extensive negotiations were enough to protect safe areas in Bosnia or resolve the ethnic conflict. According to one media report, "...the moment came at last when there was no other option but wide-ranging military action."¹ *Desert Fox* responded to the inability of United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) weapons monitors to perform their mission due to Iraqi interference, despite ongoing economic sanctions and military threats. According to his advisers, President Clinton "...in the end had little alternative but to finally unleash his arsenal."² And *Allied Force*, initiated after Serbian atrocities and rejection of a NATO-monitored peace in Kosovo, was an even more reluctant policy choice. As one report put it, "There was no easy or obvious alternative to bombing the Serbs. In the end, it seemed there was nothing else to do."³

Each of these cases therefore represented a judgment that peaceful means had failed and some application of military force was necessary to halt morally unacceptable behavior. Such a

situation is not new in American history; what *is* new is applying airpower alone, unsupported by land forces, in sustained and open-ended operations. The reasons for this choice differed in each case. In mid-1995, Bosnia featured a complex mix of military forces fielded by Bosnia's government, Bosnian Serbs, and Croats, plus civilians of different ethnicity and multinational peacekeeping forces trying to prevent violence from escalating. Introducing more troops into such a situation would have been dangerous operationally and difficult politically. For *Desert Fox* the situation was somewhat simpler—there was no possibility of assembling any meaningful amount of ground forces. Politically, neither our friends in the region nor the Congress would have permitted it, and nothing short of occupying Iraq would have been required for land forces to affect the same targets airpower struck. As for *Allied Force*, ground troops were considered, then rejected after Army estimates that as many as 200,000 would be required to conduct an opposed entry into Kosovo.⁴ The time for deployment was too long, political support from NATO allies too uncertain, and an exit strategy too distant for such a move.⁵

Sustained strike operations therefore occurred in situations where policymakers selected limited force as the best (and perhaps only possible) means of coercing an adversary to alter its policy in ways we desired. Does that mean that SSOs constitute wars? The answer depends upon how one defines “war.” To Carl von Clausewitz, war had a simple definition—it was “...an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.”⁶ Under this definition, even though their objectives and means are limited, SSOs constitute wars. Joint doctrine has a more complex definition, terming war as “large-scale, sustained combat operations to achieve national objectives” that other instruments of power cannot achieve, and doing so with as few casualties as possible.⁷ Past SSOs have varied in their conformance to this idea of war, particularly as to whether their scale and length meet a “warlike” threshold. *Desert Fox*, for example, lasted only

four days but still included 650 total sorties and over 400 cruise missiles against 100 targets.⁸

Deliberate Force lasted longer, striking 48 targets on 12 flying days with over 3500 total sorties.⁹ And *Allied Force* has lasted over six weeks with far more total sorties than either previous SSOs. But despite variations in the scale and length of SSOs, each was far more than a one-time raid like *El Dorado Canyon* in 1986, each pursued objectives that other means had failed to achieve, and as will be shown, each took pains to limit friendly casualties.

Sustained strike operations fall short of joint doctrine's definition of war in other ways, however. Joint doctrine states that, in war, the United States will be "in a wartime state."¹⁰ While joint publications do not elaborate on what such a state involves, one can infer that it means at least some mobilization of reservists and the direct, prior consent of Congress. *Desert Storm* included both steps; *Deliberate Force* and *Desert Fox* featured neither. *Allied Force* was preceded by a Senate vote on 23 March authorizing air strikes and, a month later, the President mobilized 33,000 reservists.¹¹ In this regard, *Allied Force* is closer to a war than the other two operations, but the late reserve call-up implies that it was not meant to be so. The United States also typically fights "wars" to eliminate threats to vital interests following overt aggression by another state. For each independent air operation, in contrast, the threat to American interests was indirect, and no such operation responded to an armed invasion of a sovereign state.

If SSOs are therefore violent, coercive interventions that are not quite wars, then understanding their true nature is very difficult. The most important issues for military leaders to comprehend are the political restraints on their operational freedom that result from each conflict's limited nature. These restraints arise from two sources—the objectives SSOs pursue, and their legitimacy. For example, examining the objectives and legitimacy of each SSO helps explain why ground forces were ruled out in each case. First, ground forces would have

been unable to achieve the objectives of each operation, either because they were the wrong tools for the job or because they required too much time to assemble. Second, the legitimacy of each operation was limited, motivating policy makers to reduce their application of force to methods short of combined arms warfare. The interplay of each operation's objectives and legitimacy is more complex than such a cursory look reveals, however, and requires deeper analysis.

Multiple Objectives. Each previous sustained strike operation included a relatively simple-sounding policy objective that could have been easily translated into operational plans. *Deliberate Force* aimed at defending the safe areas in Bosnia, specifically the one around Sarajevo, by either destroying or driving out Serbian guns ringing the city.¹² *Desert Fox* was intended to degrade Iraq's ability to produce weapons of mass destruction (WMD).¹³ And *Allied Force*, according to President Clinton, began in order to deter Serbia from escalating violence in Kosovo and "to damage Serbia's capacity to wage war in the future."¹⁴ Each of these objectives could be achieved directly by destroying the proper target sets, such as heavy weapons in the field, WMD facilities, supply areas, and so on. And in each case Joint Force Commanders (JFCs) sent strikes against many targets directly related to the stated objectives.

But the simple objectives listed above were not the only ones policymakers hoped to fulfill. In each case, SSOs attempted to undermine the will of the adversary leadership to resist allied demands, a goal far more difficult to achieve. For example, *Deliberate Force* was not just about eliminating Serbian heavy weapons but also sought to convince the Bosnian Serbs to participate seriously in peace talks.¹⁵ According to The Washington Post, *Desert Fox* was less about WMD than it was about affecting Iraqi leadership, trying "to either fatally weaken the underpinnings of Saddam Hussein's regime or kill him outright."¹⁶ And *Allied Force*'s aim of

preventing persecution of Albanian Kosovars was less important than another goal—coercing Serbia into accepting a peace agreement it had earlier rejected.¹⁷

The objectives of destroying enemy capabilities and undermining enemy will are not completely complementary. From an airman's perspective, they usually require striking very different target sets. For example, nearly half of all *Desert Fox* targets (49 of 100) struck regime-related sites in Iraq, such as Republican Guard barracks, secret police headquarters, and others not at all connected with WMD production.¹⁸ Similarly, *Allied Force* targets have included Slobodan Milosevic's house, the Yugoslav and Serbian Ministry of the Interior buildings, the Socialist Party building in Belgrade, and television facilities in the capital. Those targets had at best a distant connection to ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. Thus, trying to undermine enemy will directly through airpower dilutes the effort devoted to destroying the enemy's capabilities to make mischief.

A further disadvantage of attacking an enemy regime is that doing so has little chance of reducing enemy will to resist, particularly if the operation's length is measured in days or weeks instead of months and years. An unnamed foreign envoy speaking to The New York Times after *Desert Fox* said, "The real purpose was to weaken the regime, but (Saddam is) stronger than ever now. He's a hero among the so-called Arab masses because he defied the Americans."¹⁹ And after the first bombs fell on Belgrade during *Allied Force*, even critics of Slobodan Milosevic's regime rallied to his cause. Said one Serb, "These bombs will just increase the sense that the world is against us and we must stick together."²⁰ Tellingly, many of the same leaders who planned SSOs knew that their effect on enemy will to resist would be small. For example, neither policymakers nor military commanders expected *Desert Fox* to cause Saddam Hussein's downfall (or end his WMD program) despite their desire to weaken his control over Iraq.²¹

Expending effort to pursue an objective you do not expect to attain, and even causing the opposite of the effect you desire, is not rational strategy. Rather, it is borne out of frustration arising from dealing with adversaries who defy us repeatedly over long periods.²² Every SSO occurred only after years of morally outrageous behavior by regimes seemingly focused not upon serving their people but rather upon holding on to political power. Only *Deliberate Force* avoided targeting the enemy regime directly, in part because the Bosnian Serbs did not control a sovereign state and therefore lacked fixed sites symbolizing political power. Our response in the other two cases, *Desert Fox* and *Allied Force*, was to inflict “pain” on enemy regimes despite creating both short-term problems (strengthening regime popularity) and long-term problems (such as ensuring the end of weapons inspections in Iraq).

This essay is too limited to examine in more detail the literature on the strategic efficacy of bombing to coerce policy change from an enemy leadership by causing it “pain.” But several historical examples suggest that such a strategy can work under specific circumstances. The atomic bombing of Japan in 1945, Operation *Linebacker II* over North Vietnam in 1972, and *Deliberate Force* all attacked enemies who had been fighting on the ground for years, were consequently tired, and were shocked by the intensity of the air attack they received. These three cases resulted in achievement of the American policy goals for which they were intended. Thus, punitive air strikes cannot be dismissed as bad strategy in every situation, but leaders must comprehend that bombing’s effect is situation-dependent. In cases like *Desert Fox* and *Allied Force*, where the adversary is better prepared for bombing and under no pressure from a ground campaign, punishment bombing has far less chance to succeed.

Legitimacy. If targeting enemy regimes is problematic because it means pursuing objectives attainable only in rare circumstances, targeting enemy capabilities is the logical

alternative. But striking enemy capabilities creates a new set of problems for JFCs arising from legitimacy. Joint doctrine defines legitimacy as “...the perception by a specific audience of the legality, morality, or rightness of a set of actions.”²³ This succinct definition conveys far more complexity than is apparent at first glance. For example, there are many audiences for which legitimacy matters, such as American citizens and the governments of allies and essential coalition partners. The legality of an operation depends on its conformance to domestic and international law; its morality depends on striking only at legitimate, belligerent targets with measured force; its rightness depends on a perception that its ends are just and its risks acceptable. Consequently, there are many dimensions of legitimacy, and actions that build legitimacy for one audience can simultaneously undermine it for another.

At the domestic level, the chief American legitimacy concern is the rightness (or match of ends and means) of foreign military interventions like sustained strike operations. Previous SSOs have been prosecuted in situations where the threat to American vital interests was at best indirect and often was obscure. In such cases, which lack an act of aggression, declaration of war, or direct attack on Americans to stir up popular passion prior to an intervention, leaders know that their freedom of action depends largely on keeping U.S. casualties to a minimum—a chief reason they avoid using ground forces. JFCs have reacted to this limitation by basing all operational planning on risk reduction. Every SSO initially pounded enemy air defenses; *Deliberate Force*, in fact, struck primarily those sorts of targets from start to finish. Risk reduction also involved extensive use of cruise missiles, more of which were fired in *Desert Fox*’s four days than in *Desert Storm*’s 43 days. Other safety measures included flying only at night during the operation’s initial stages to avoid optically-guided threats, and keeping aircraft at high altitudes where anti-aircraft guns are ineffective. And a most basic safety measure is

cutting sortie rates to reduce the number of aircraft exposed to threats; as Table 1 below shows, all SSOs were limited in intensity, particularly when compared to Operation *Desert Storm*.

Table 1: Relative Intensity of Air Operations²⁴

Operation	Dates	Total Sorties Per Day	Weapons Expended Per Day	Cruise Missiles Per Day	PGM Use
Deliberate Force	30 Aug-20 Sep 95	200	85	1	70%
Desert Fox	16-19 Dec 98	160	150	104	“Most”
Allied Force	24 Mar 99 +	230*	N/A	16*	90%
Desert Storm	17 Jan-28 Feb 91	2600	5300	8	8%

* Data are for first week of the operation.

These operational limitations imposed by domestic legitimacy undermine efforts to achieve objectives related to destroying enemy capabilities. Night-only flying builds in pauses an enemy can use to recover, disperse, and employ forces, a factor that helped the Serbs conduct ethnic cleansing during *Allied Force*’s early stages. Cruise missiles are limited in number and require prior knowledge of a target’s location, making them unsuitable against mobile targets. Controlling sortie rates obviously limits the number of targets struck. And high-altitude flying complicates target detection and identification, as well as causing unintended pauses during bad weather, further reducing airpower’s effect against fielded forces. In contrast, most regime-related targets are fixed sites that can be struck with cruise missiles or GPS-guided munitions in any weather. Thus, the legitimacy-related concern over limiting casualties motivates leaders to strike regime-related targets, despite the known drawbacks of such a strategy.

Yet it is strikes against enemy capabilities that are the most legitimate to another audience—states whose cooperation is vital to conducting the operation. These states include allies contributing forces, UN Security Council members, and coalition partners supplying bases

and overflight rights. These states all worry about the legality, morality, and rightness of military operations, particularly in cases where the UN Charter has not been violated. To minimize protests and maximize cooperation overseas, American leaders try to build legality in many ways, some of which are shown in Table 2, and by linking attacks to “triggering” events such as the Sarajevo mortar attack or release of the UNSCOM inspection report. But the need for legality reduces operational surprise; in both *Deliberate Force* and *Allied Force*, a full day passed between NATO’s strike authorization and the first sorties. Moreover, in both cases military leaders announced an outline of how the strikes would go before any sorties were flown. Such announcements reassure friendly audiences about how operations will reduce risk to both pilots and civilians. But they also make even tactical surprise difficult to achieve and allow adversaries to attack our strategy by dispersing air defense weapons and preparing redundant command posts. *Desert Fox*, in contrast, achieved some surprise at the expense of legality, with strikes beginning immediately upon release of the UNSCOM report criticizing Iraq’s lack of compliance with weapons inspections. This action, taken to preclude diplomacy that might avert strikes, generated criticism from Congress, Russia, and allies, all of which helped to limit the length of *Desert Fox* to four days, by far the shortest SSO.²⁵

Table 2: Indicators of Legitimacy

Event	Deliberate Force	Desert Fox	Allied Force
Specific authorization by UN	Y	N	N
Specific authorization by NATO	Y	N	Y
Lack of strong protests by UNSC members*	Y	N	N
Public endorsement from UN Secretary General	Y	N	Y
Non-US forces participate	Y	Y	Y

*United Nations Security Council members are China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Legality issues limit a JFC's freedom of action in ways other than reducing surprise. For example, if a triggering event strengthens the legality of independent air operations, then strikes against targets directly related to that event (which are capabilities-related, like heavy weapons and WMD facilities) are desirable. This factor pushes JFCs to attack the very targets that domestic legitimacy concerns make difficult to hit. Plus, in every sustained strike operation, the United States has chosen to incorporate allied forces and use foreign bases to demonstrate a wide perception of legality (which is significant since using naval airpower alone was viable in each case). But combined operational planning and execution are complex affairs that reduce a JFC's ability to take risks or shift strategies. Finally, JFCs must take care not to act beyond their "legal" mandate. *Deliberate Force*, for example, was based upon NATO acting as a neutral broker between Muslims and Serbs; strikes too intense would have undermined NATO's legitimacy, angered Russia, and jeopardized the peace talks the operation sought to produce.

An operation's perceived morality creates more operational problems. For example, British Prime Minister Tony Blair said at the start of *Allied Force* that "It is important the people of Serbia know our quarrel is not with them. It is with the architects of Kosovo's ethnic cleansing."²⁶ He made very similar remarks at the start of *Desert Fox*.²⁷ These remarks, which try to counter perceptions that allied bombing is immoral, make it imperative that JFCs minimize collateral damage to civilian populations in enemy states. Moreover, striking the civilian populations an operation seeks to protect is equally damaging to the legitimacy of actions like *Deliberate Force* and *Allied Force* (not to mention their objectives). Thus, when it comes to the moral dimension, legitimacy mandates unusual operational care to avoid collateral damage.

Numerous operational constraints result from the imperative of avoiding collateral damage, the most significant of which is deleting certain targets altogether. *Deliberate Force*

avoided strikes on Serbian heavy weapons and troop concentrations in large part because of their proximity to civilian populations on both sides. Many dual-use industrial and chemical facilities were dropped from *Desert Fox*'s target list when planners could not be absolutely sure they were legitimate military targets, creating the potential for another "baby-milk factory" incident.²⁸ And attacks on Serb forces during *Allied Force* were scaled back after NATO mistakenly struck a civilian convoy on 14 April. Another constraint is reliance on precision-guided munitions (PGMs). Table 1 shows that all independent air operations used PGMs almost exclusively, a major shift from *Desert Storm*. While PGMs make operations more lethal, they can reduce the intensity of operations by limiting the types of ordnance and platforms available to the JFC.

Yet more constraints arise from the fact that foreign audiences have concerns about the rightness of sustained strike operations, beyond concern over casualties. During *Deliberate Force*, these concerns focused on the campaign's intensity; striking the Bosnian Serbs with cruise missiles caused alarm in many capitals since it seemed like a powerful, unwarranted escalation. Concern over escalation also caused Italy to refuse to host F-117's, which were consequently never employed in the operation.²⁹ *Desert Fox* had similar problems. Because the Saudi Arabians felt the strikes were too limited to topple Saddam Hussein, they prevented coalition aircraft from using Saudi bases to attack Iraq.³⁰ Plus, *Desert Fox* lasted only four days since bombing during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan would offend Arab populations in the region. This time limit forced planners to cut 150 or more targets from the initially proposed list.³¹ And *Allied Force*, despite NATO's blessing, rested on shaky ground because it was NATO's first attack on a sovereign state (exceeding NATO's defensive purpose) and sought to change how Yugoslavia's government treated its own citizens within its own borders. Only

Serbian atrocities have permitted NATO to escalate its operations during *Allied Force* by showing that the operation's ends indeed justified its means.

These examples show how an operation's legitimacy and objectives are inseparably linked. *Deliberate Force*'s legitimacy rested upon striking hard enough to coerce the Serbs but not so hard that NATO's ability to broker a peace was permanently wrecked. This delicate balance required such care in defining operational objectives that Lieutenant General Michael E. Ryan, commander of Allied Air Forces Southern Command, personally approved every aim point and weapon choice for the entire operation.³² *Desert Fox* suffered from a similar problem—it was harsh enough to be unpopular among Arab populations, but not harsh enough to remove Saddam from power, resulting in limited Saudi government cooperation and therefore little ability to achieve any objectives. The fact that *Allied Force* represented intervention in a sovereign state's internal affairs without UN Security Council action had much to do with the early decision ruling out ground forces, a decision reinforced by Hungary's refusal to allow NATO ground forces to stage from its territory. This legitimacy-related decision made prevention of ethnic cleansing impossible, despite the fact that such an objective was the primary motivation for the operation in the first place.

Legitimacy is also closely related to each SSO's timing. Because each operation depended on a triggering event to demonstrate its rightness, each had to begin in the immediate aftermath of that event. In the case of *Desert Fox*, it meant that the operation's length was politically limited. Bombing could not begin until the UNSCOM report was released, but that event caused the first strikes to occur at the height of the congressional impeachment debate. On the other hand, the operation could not afford to wait until after Ramadan or the end of the impeachment process, either of which would have delayed operations for a month or more—too

long after the triggering event to retain legitimacy. So *Desert Fox* lasted only four days, far less time than would have been operationally desirable given its policy objectives. Furthermore, *Allied Force*, tied to Serbian rejection of the peace plan negotiated at Rambouillet, began in March, when foul weather was certain to hamper air operations (and did so).³³

It should be obvious by now that legitimacy is the most pervasive limitation upon the strategy and operational planning that guide sustained strike operations. Only by understanding the effects of limited legitimacy can paradoxical behavior be understood, such as trying to coerce an adversary while telling him when and how you're attacking, or striking regime-related targets in full knowledge that such strikes will accomplish little. In fact, legitimacy limits can be so debilitating to operations that strikes against enemy capabilities can be equally ineffectual. General Wesley K. Clark, Supreme Allied Commander Europe, said at the start of *Allied Force* that "...there's nothing that air power can do by itself to deter paramilitary forces from committing acts of brutality."³⁴ This comment indicates foreknowledge of airpower's limited ability to affect the enemy capabilities most central to the operation's legitimacy, further proof that *Allied Force* was motivated more by frustration than by calculation of its likely results.

Enemy Reaction. Given the tremendous operational limits on sustained strike operations, it does not take much action by an enemy to further minimize their effectiveness. Many enemy countertactics have already been described, such as dispersal of mobile targets, building redundant command structures, and taking advantage of predictable bombing pauses to carry out desired operations. Indeed, by limiting our initial strikes (in the case of *Desert Fox*, all our strikes) to hours of darkness, we permit enemies to "own the day," enabling them to carry out offensive actions at the time of day when they are most effective, while our strikes focus

mostly on air defenses. And if our operations occur between spring and fall, more daylight than darkness is prevalent, a factor that works even more in the enemy's favor.

More importantly, adversaries have gained vast knowledge of our operational methods due to the recurrence of American-led bombing operations this decade. They now know that they can destroy few of our aircraft and that we can hit what we can identify. They also know that limiting losses and collateral damage is high in our priorities. With this knowledge, enemies turn our strike operations into a contest not between forces but between their forces and our intelligence apparatus. For example, we can destroy buildings but cannot always assess what is inside them; thus, enemies can move some vital equipment out of buildings to prevent its loss, given the warning we invariably give them before striking (even *Desert Fox* was preceded by departure of UNSCOM inspectors). During *Allied Force*, for example, the Serbs had emptied the Interior Ministry buildings in Belgrade well before we struck them.³⁵ Plus, as *Desert Fox* demonstrated, if an enemy can create doubt in our minds about the purpose of a dual-use facility, that facility is likely to escape attack.

Our intelligence problems thus center upon enemy efforts to hide vital resources or make them otherwise unpalatable targets. *Desert Fox* benefited in this regard from information passed to us by UNSCOM, allowing strikes on targets we had not previously identified. But other SSOs had no such inside intelligence. *Allied Force*, for example, has been slowed by the Serbian military's ability to hide their forces using both natural and artificial cover, and by placement of mobile targets near civilians. The less such targets have to move, the lower our chances of finding them, and the less effective are our strikes on their supply routes and communications.

Shifting Our Paradigms. The foregoing discussion paints a bleak picture for sustained strike operations. They seem to occur chiefly out of frustration, in situations where the

legitimacy to use force is so limited that JFCs have little operational freedom. They pursue objectives that even their proponents do not seriously believe they can attain. And they strike at enemies increasingly able to predict our actions and counter the effects of our airpower. The easy answer for these problems is never to confront them. Perhaps we should return to the doctrines of former Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell, which advocate (in part) avoiding use of force unless it is overwhelming, meant to “win,” and in pursuit of clear and complementary objectives.

There is much to commend this American view of warfare, except that it seems to leave policymakers with an all-or-nothing choice when deciding whether to apply military force. These two alternatives have been the first ruled out in every situation that resulted in a sustained strike operation. Policymakers seem to have decided that, to paraphrase Winston Churchill, SSOs are the worst form of action, except for all the others. Even joint doctrine acknowledges that combat operations short of war are possible in situations like peace enforcement operations or strikes and raids. It therefore behooves us to find an answer to the more difficult question of how to apply airpower to coerce an enemy when objectives and legitimacy are limited.

One possible answer has already been suggested—to save the exclusive use of coercive airpower for situations when it can push a teetering enemy toward our desired goals. Sudden, intense, and punishing air strikes may be able to end long-running wars by making continued fighting more painful than peace. But these cases are, we should hope, few and far between. They require a previous and lengthy ground war and presuppose that we have limited prior bombing campaigns in ways that permit us to strike with markedly greater intensity. Such situations are not, of course, impossible, but are rare enough that policymakers have seen the need for intervention in other situations that do not meet the above criteria.

Allied Force was the most difficult of those situations. Unlike *Deliberate Force*, it did not occur after years of warfare and lacked serious ground fighting (which occurred during the earlier operation when Bosnian Muslims and Croats retook 20% of Bosnia in mid-September 1995) because the Kosovo Liberation Army was weak and in danger of defeat. Unlike *Desert Fox*, its objectives and timetable were open-ended, making it difficult for NATO to “declare victory” and unilaterally end the bombing. Improving our effectiveness in *Allied Force* would have required at least three critical paradigm shifts before the first cruise missile was launched.

First, policymakers should have treated the operation more like a war than as strategic punishment. Every effort allied leaders have made to avoid friendly casualties and collateral damage indicates that SSOs are attempts to wage war without risk. Policymakers even try to limit the risk that a failed SSO could damage their own political influence by defining objectives in unmeasurable terms like “degrading” enemy capabilities. But putting the power and prestige of NATO on the line through a coercive bombing campaign cannot occur without political risk. President Clinton himself, at NATO’s fiftieth anniversary in April 1999, implied that NATO’s future relevance depended on the success of *Allied Force*.³⁶ This means that there were very high stakes riding on the operation, stakes high enough that the risks NATO took should have been commensurate with them.

One of those risks is the risk of losses. As *Allied Force* began, Pentagon officials predicted the loss of at least twelve allied aircraft in sustained operations.³⁷ After six weeks of bombing, actual losses due to enemy action amounted to a single F-117 and perhaps an F-16. While the low loss rate has many possible causes, it certainly indicates extraordinary care by NATO to protect its aircraft. But protecting aircraft at the expense of permitting widespread ethnic cleansing is simply too large a compromise of strategic objectives for the sake of

legitimacy. Airpower could have been most effective early in the campaign, when Serbian forces were moving in force within Kosovo to conduct operations, but striking those forces would have meant flying lower, in daylight, and against a more intact air defense system. NATO should have accepted a great deal of that risk if, indeed, its future existence were at stake.

Treating SSOs as wars also reminds leaders that strikes seek to achieve positive objectives, rather than being merely the least evil of several poor alternatives. In this sense, Weinberger and Powell are correct—you choose war only when you mean to reach your goals. Today, the key insight policymakers need is not that war is about winning but rather that sustained bombing is war. Once leaders accept that reality, they will be more willing to accept risk commensurate with reward and discard methods they know will fail.

The second paradigm shift applies to commanders of allied ground forces. Despite repeated demonstrations of what airpower can achieve when operating simultaneously with friendly ground forces, planning tools available to ground force leaders continue to overestimate how much land force is required to deal with a given enemy. NATO's estimate that 200,000 troops would be needed to invade Kosovo, a number many times higher than the Serbian forces deployed there, was overly cautious and presumed that land forces would be the main, supported force. Ground force commanders must begin to see cases where armies support airpower.

Many analysts saw *Desert Storm* as the first instance where coalition armies served to fix enemy forces in place so that airpower could kill them. Some even described the 100-hour land war that capped the campaign as a “mopping-up operation.” Yet the prewar estimates of forces required for *Allied Force* reflect traditional attacker-to-defender force ratios, numbers that predate modern airpower’s abilities. This may be so because many people saw *Desert Storm* as

an anomaly unlikely to be repeated. And indeed, Kosovo was not Kuwait; cover was abundant, civilians were plentiful, and the enemy was uncooperative.

But the lesson of *Desert Storm*—and of many, many air campaigns—is that airpower works best when synergy with land forces exists.³⁷ Such synergy can take many forms, but the key idea is that armies can force the enemy to act in ways that make airpower’s job easier. In *Allied Force*, air-ground synergy would have existed had a limited allied ground force entered Kosovo to make Serbian forces move, at times when they wanted to hide. Indeed, the fact that Kosovo was not Kuwait strengthened the need for a coordinated land operation. Such an operation would have forced the Serbian forces to come into the open, adjust their plans, and use up supplies, magnifying the effect of air strikes against both mobile and fixed targets. But because the main effort would have been in the air, the land operation would have required far less than 200,000 troops. In the future, such a strategy will be possible only if leaders are more willing to act forcefully despite limited legitimacy. But it also will be possible only if land force planners stop thinking that every deployment of armies means the main effort is on the ground.

The final paradigm shift is for practitioners of airpower. Modern airpower theories like parallel war and strategic paralysis focus on the operational and strategic effects of air forces, showing how they can reduce entire enemy states to ineffective collections of failed systems. The limitation of such theories is that, like the American concept of war, they apply best to high-intensity conflicts. Where both objectives and legitimacy are limited, wrecking an entire enemy society is undesirable, as it was during *Deliberate Force* and *Desert Fox*.

Thus, air leaders must recognize that SSOs demand greater attention to destroying enemy capabilities than undermining enemy will. Airpower is unlikely to accomplish strategic goals by destroying targets related to leadership or economic infrastructure when no ground war is

ongoing. If time and friendly forces are limited, attacking the enemy regime directly can even be counterproductive. And without air-ground synergy, air operations against logistics and command and control systems have little effect. Thus, a lack of air-ground synergy requires airpower to attrit enemy capabilities in the field (an unheralded lesson of *Desert Storm*, which sent 56% of its strikes against Iraqi land forces)³⁸, a scheme that simultaneously focuses on the “triggering” targets most related to the operation’s legality.

With limited air-ground synergy as recommended above, capabilities-related strikes should remain the focus of sustained strike operations and can be more effective. But regardless of ground force participation, legitimacy issues will continue to limit the means available to allied commanders. Consequently, planners should do their best to prevent the inevitable desire to strike the enemy regime from reducing the effort devoted to hitting enemy capabilities. In other words, they should apply the concept of mass, concentrating combat power on the targets most likely to produce results, not to mention assembling as many aircraft as possible before the campaign begins. And because adversaries know more than ever how to counter our strategy, commanders must expect to persevere in their efforts for considerable periods.

None of the above paradigm shifts guarantees that the next SSO will succeed. But in a sense, they move future interventions closer to the Weinberger/Powell doctrines by stressing sincere pursuit of a clear, limited, and attainable objective using force made overwhelming by air-ground synergy. In other words, they apply lessons Americans have learned about using force, in ways that remove their all-or-nothing implications. If today’s leaders can understand how legitimacy affects both strategy and operations, open their minds to newer if discomfiting ways of thinking, and act accordingly, American national security policy can still control risk during coercive interventions while increasing the chance that we will achieve our aims.

NOTES

- ¹ R.W. Apple, Jr., "Goal of Bombers: The Bargaining Table," The New York Times, 31 August 1995, A16.
- ² John F. Harris, "A Decision Reconfirmed," The Washington Post, 17 December 1998, A1.
- ³ Joseph L. Galloway, "Balkan Nights," U.S. News & World Report, 5 April 1999, 21.
- ⁴ David A. Fulghum, "Serb Threat Subsides, But U.S. Still Worries," Aviation Week & Space Technology, 12 April 1999, 26.
- ⁵ Craig R. Whitney and Eric Schmitt, "NATO told bombing would not be enough," The Providence Journal, 1 April 1999, A21.
- ⁶ Carl von Clausewitz, On War, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), 75.
- ⁷ U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Doctrine for Joint Operations (Joint Pub 3-0) (Washington, D.C.: 1 February 1995), vii.
- ⁸ Duncan Lennox, "'Fox': the results," Jane's Defence Weekly, 13 January 1999, 25.
- ⁹ Robert C. Owen, "The Balkans Air Campaign Study: Part 2," Airpower Journal, Fall 1997, 8.
- ¹⁰ Joint Pub 3-0, vii.
- ¹¹ Elizabeth Becker, "U.S. orders largest call-up of reservists since Gulf war," The Providence Journal, 28 April 1999, A1.
- ¹² Roger Cohen, "NATO jets attack Serbian positions around Sarajevo," The New York Times, 30 August 1995, A1.
- ¹³ Bradley Graham and Dana Priest, "U.S. Targets Sites Crucial to Weapons-Making," The Washington Post, 17 December 1998, A31.
- ¹⁴ R.W. Apple Jr., "A Fresh Set Of U.S. Goals," The New York Times, 25 March 1999, A1.
- ¹⁵ R.W. Apple Jr., "Goal of Bombers: The Bargaining Table," A1.
- ¹⁶ Rick Atkinson and Vernon Loeb, "A Limited Operation Could Limit Success," The Washington Post, 17 December 1998, A1.
- ¹⁷ Craig R. Whitney, "NATO's Plan: A Barrage, Not a Pinprick," The New York Times, 24 March 1999, A1.
- ¹⁸ William M. Arkin, "Precision Undermined Its Purpose," The Washington Post, 17 January 1999, B4.
- ¹⁹ Stephen Kinzer, "This Time, Little Damage Is to Be Seen in Baghdad," The New York Times, 21 December 1998, A12.
- ²⁰ "Belgrade's citizens unite in wake of bombing in city," The Providence Journal, 4 April 1999, A9.
- ²¹ Bradley Graham and Dana Priest, "U.S. Details Strategy, Damage," The Washington Post, 18 December 1998, A59.
- ²² I owe this insight to Commander Angus Ross, Royal Navy, of the Naval War College faculty.

²³ U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other Than War (Joint Pub 3-07) (Washington, D.C.: 16 June 1995), II-5.

²⁴ Sources: *Desert Storm*: Thomas A. Keaney and Eliot A. Cohen, Gulf War Air Power Survey Summary Report. *Deliberate Force*: Robert C. Owen, "The Balkans Air Campaign Study: Part 2." *Desert Fox*: Duncan Lennox, "Fox": the results". *Allied Force*: John D. Morrocco, *et al*, "Weather, Weapons Dearth Slow NATO Strikes," Aviation Week & Space Technology, 5 April 1999, 27.

²⁵ William Drozdiak, "Opposition to Airstrikes Voiced in Key Capitals," The Washington Post, 17 December 1999, A29.

²⁶ Tony Blair, "A New Generation Draws the Line," Newsweek, 19 April 1999, 40.

²⁷ Drozdiak, A29.

²⁸ Arkin, B4. The "baby-milk factory" was a suspected chemical plant in Iraq destroyed by coalition air strikes during *Desert Storm*. The Iraqis insisted it made only baby formula and widely propagandized the attack as illegally targeting civilians.

²⁹ Eric Schmitt, "Wider NATO Raids on Serbs Expose Rifts in Alliance," The New York Times, 12 September 1995, A12.

³⁰ Douglas Jehl, "U.S. Fighters in Saudi Arabia Grounded," The New York Times, 19 December 1998, A9.

³¹ Lennox, 25. Since *Desert Fox* struck no more than 100 targets, the "Ramadan factor" may have caused its intensity to have been reduced by as much as 60%.

³² Owen, 9.

³³ Brian Duffy, "Heartbreak in the Balkans," U.S. News & World Report, 12 April 1999, 19. Colonel John Warden (USAF Retired) was especially critical of the timing of *Allied Force*, arguing that accepting some ethnic cleansing in order to wait for better weather would have been a preferable strategy.

³⁴ Daniel Williams and R. Jeffrey Smith, "Yugoslav Rampage Grows in Kosovo," The Washington Post, 28 March 1999, A28.

³⁵ "Belgrade's citizens...," A9.

³⁶ At the opening of the 50th anniversary summit in Washington on April 23rd, the President said that NATO "...will not have meaning in the 21st century if it permits the slaughter of innocents on its doorstep." Quoted in R.W. Apple Jr., "Kosovo Overshadows Subdued NATO Event," The New York Times, 24 April 1999, A9.

³⁷ Steven Lee Myers, "NATO Opens Broad Barrage Against Serbs as Clinton Denounces Yugoslav President," The New York Times, 25 March 1999, A13.

³⁸ *Deliberate Force*, arguably the most successful independent air operation, had two forms of air-ground synergy. First, some British and French ground forces were present, constituting NATO's Rapid Reaction Force (RRF). The RRF, rather than aircraft, used artillery to strike suspected heavy weapons emplacements around Sarajevo. Second, the previously mentioned Bosnian Government and Croatian attack on the Serbs created an unintentional synergy with NATO's air strikes, motivating the Serbs to remove their heavy weapons and return to negotiations which, later in 1995, resulted in the Dayton Accords. See, for example, Mike O'Connor, "Bosnian Serb Civilians Flee Joint Muslim-Croat Attack," The New York Times, 14 September 1995, A10.

³⁹ Keaney, 65.

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